

The Mennonite Quarterly Review

MENNONITES IN AMERICAN SOCIETY: MODERNITY AND THE PERSISTENCE OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

PAUL TOEWS*

Mennonites are a diverse and motley lot. Included in the extended family are those who have largely rejected Western civilization, resisted modernization and live almost wholly within the boundaries of a separated culture. At the other end of the spectrum are Mennonites fully integrated into the technological, urban and global culture. They are part of the central institutions of North American society. They sit in the largest stock-brokerage firms, hold prominent positions in government, acquire directorships on boards of the largest corporations, teach at distinguished universities, dine at fashionable restaurants, vacation on the Greek islands and largely feel at home in the world.

Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, one of the population centers of the North American Mennonite world, provides some contrasting images of these people. More Mennonites live in this county than in any other in the United States. In North America only southern Manitoba has a greater number of Mennonites. Yet even in Lancaster, Mennonites constitute only a small percentage of the population. A recent census of the county revealed seventy-six denominational groups. Nine are Mennonites of varying kinds. Of the 183,293 church members in the county, 27,029 were Mennonite. That means Mennonites were slightly under 15% of the church members.¹

*Paul Toews is professor of history at Fresno Pacific College, Fresno, California.

¹ Eugene Kraybill, "700 Churches: A Special Report," reprint from *Lancaster Intelligencer Journal*, Mar. 1985.

Lancaster County is a major tourist destination in the United States. People from around the world come to see Mennonite and Amish culture. It is not uncommon to find large touring buses winding through the back country in search of the quaint old Amish and Mennonite ways. Lancaster is a tourist attraction because it is a place where many modern people can smell, taste and touch their ancestral ways. It is cheaper to go from New York to Lancaster than back to Bulgaria, Poland or Yugoslavia. So people come by the busloads—all kinds, but especially the Eastern European immigrants of New York. They come for nostalgia, for gaining a sense of how it once was and how far they have come. Here they can relive the past, unaffected by its harshness and without their own tragic memories. They think of the Amish and Mennonites as the bearers of the world they once knew. They are right. Some Mennonites are a stage piece out of history. Some Mennonites are old-fashioned. Some live in a world circumscribed by the limits of horse-drawn carriage travel. Some seem strangely unaffected by the twentieth century. Some Amish and Mennonites have proven that the pace of change is controllable, that the past need not inevitably give way to the technological imperative.

In rural Lancaster County is the village of Akron. Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) headquarters are located here in a small, unpretentious office building and several converted residences. MCC is a relief, development and service agency meeting human need on every continent. Under its sponsorship in 1986 approximately five hundred refugees were relocated to North America. Through its China Educational Exchange Program, Mennonites were teaching in thirteen educational institutions in the People's Republic of China. Ninety-three "trainees" from all over the world came to North America through its version of the "People to People" exchange program. Together with six other denominations, and through the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, Mennonites shipped 54,200 metric tons of grain to needy countries. Other kinds of food aid shipped from North America totaled 12,850 metric tons.²

In these MCC offices one can find out the latest developments in virtually every country around the world. Staff members, most of whom are volunteers and work only for expenses rather than salary, can talk knowledgeably about virtually every global political issue. MCC people meet with the leaders of many different political societies to discuss economic, religious and political issues. The major newspapers of the world are found in the headquarters' small library. Staff members are coming and going to every corner of the earth. The coffee conversation roams around the world. The Akron telexes relay urgent messages to and from Nicaragua, Vietnam, Lesotho, India and many other places. The phone conversations are carried on in multiple languages. A steady stream of delegates takes MCC knowledge and concerns

² 1986 *Mennonite Central Committee Workbook* (Akron, Pa.: Mennonite Central Committee, 1987).

to U. S. congressional committees, to State Department planners and even to the White House oval office. Other MCC personnel maintain regular contact with United Nations representatives and offices in New York, Geneva and elsewhere. Within a few miles of the horse-and-buggy Mennonite and Amish farms these coreligionists are deeply engaged in the political issues of the day.

Most of the tourists looking at the quaintness of the Mennonite-Amish family in Lancaster, or for that matter in similar rural settings across the country, do not know that elsewhere other members of the same family are thoroughly modern. While some travel with horses to a family farm to worship in time-honored ways, others gather in a meetinghouse to debate the latest fashions in Western theology. Some congregations sing the traditional melodies of the *Ausbund* (a sixteenth-century hymnal), while others do contemporary religious jazz and Bach cantatas with orchestral accompaniment. Some Lancaster Mennonite congregations are populated by bankers, lawyers, psychiatrists, professors and businessmen whose firms do an annual business worth hundreds of millions of dollars. These folks are integrated into the intellectual, economic and professional elite of Western culture. Although they inhabit differing intellectual, cultural and economic universes, none are any less the bearers of the Mennonite tradition than the others. English tweed, the broad-rimmed Amish hat and MCC volunteer fatigues are compatriots in this world.

These contrasting images point to the diversity of the modern Mennonite world. Twentieth-century Mennonites are both on the margins of American society and implicated in the central institutions of the social system. They are simultaneously peripheral and relevant to the functioning of many social institutions. They are both separated from and integrated into the social fabric of America. They present good material for social scientists arguing both the pluralist and assimilationist positions on ethnic life in the nation. They are a distinguishable community, and yet they are not. Many Mennonites pass through theaters, airports, hotels and banks with no identifying cultural or visual symbols. Others break the visual uniformity of American dress and betray their social aloofness.

The social and cultural diversity is one side of the descriptive ledger, but the continuity of the Mennonite world is also pronounced. Mennonites are a deeply religious and devout people. They cultivate disciplines of personal piety and personal religious devotion. Mennonite theology of all kinds begins with the notion of the kingdom of God as a new reality that entered into history. The kingdom is the eschatological fulfillment of history that is partially realizable in the present. The church as a new "community," as a new "people," is the present incarnation of the coming kingdom. A religious commitment in Mennonite theology implies an identification with this new community. The church or the kingdom that God is creating lives by a new ethic. That means that the church understands itself as frequently being in some tension with the dominant society. Central to that tension for virtually all Menno-

nites has been the commitment to reconciliation and peacemaking as a way of life. Most Mennonites center much of their public ethic in the rejection of violence and the exercise of state military power as inimical to Christian faith. Those ethical positions appear in every Mennonite confessional statement from 1527 to the present.³

Mennonites, in comparison with the rest of society, are conservative. They value tradition. They utilize the past as a source of inspiration. Their past contains the story of heroic religious commitments maintained during times of intense religious persecution. Mennonites more than many other peoples have resisted changes that threatened cherished values. Mennonites have moved over the face of the earth to sustain "old" values threatened by changes in the political or cultural realms of various host societies.

Mennonites have frequently been characterized as "the quiet in the land." In a world of noise, self-assertion and self-aggrandizement, they practice restraint, humility and quietness. Most Mennonite families do not have a rich tradition of cultivating hyperbole and showmanship. Deference is a more commonly cultivated virtue. Most feel more comfortable in the background, out of the limelight. With little fanfare many Mennonites flavor their communities with acts of service and kindness.

Mennonites have historically been a people of the soil. They have pioneered agricultural communities in the Polish Vistula River delta, the Russian steppes, the Canadian prairies, the Paraguayan Chaco and the American frontier. Mennonites remain disproportionately rural in comparison to the rest of the population. In 1970 the rural population of the country was 26.5%. A 1971 survey of the five most urban denominational groups among Mennonites revealed that 65% were still rural. Among those same five denominations 27% of the adult males were farm owners or farm managers. In the national culture only 2.7% follow those vocations.⁴

The Mennonite story begins with the Anabaptist movement in the sixteenth century. The Anabaptists were part of the larger Reformation movement seeking change in both the theology and polity of Christendom. Anabaptists stood with the Anglicans, Lutherans, Calvinists and other Reformers in their rejection of many practices in the Christian church. Yet they simultaneously called for additional, more radical reforms. These "radicals," originating in numerous places (in Switzerland, Holland and Germany) which were subject to the sectarianism of many radical movements and hence highly pluralistic, called for changes that, although rejected in the sixteenth century, were the ideological forerunners of many modern developments. In rejecting "state Christianity" they called for religious membership to be based on voluntary

3 Howard Loewen, *One Lord, One Church, One Hope and One God: Mennonite Confessions of Faith in North America* (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute for Mennonite Studies, 1985).

4 J. Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder, *Anabaptists Four Centuries Later: A Profile of Five Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Denominations* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1975), 284.

commitments. By initiating reforming communities parallel to the existing territorial church, they implicitly moved Western culture toward religious pluralism and the consequent need for religious toleration. These concepts made the Anabaptists unwittingly progenitors of distinctively modern notions.⁵

By breaking with the medieval hope for a "Christian society" and instead offering up the notion of the church as a distinctive people, based on adult religious experiences rather than automatic infant membership, the Anabaptists incurred the wrath of virtually every other religious movement of the time. The cost of advancing these ideas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was religious persecution and martyrdom. The seventeenth-century search for religious toleration and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment gave these concepts legitimacy in Western culture. But by then Mennonites and other kindred spirits were a people dispersed to the corners of European society where toleration was more readily secured.

The Mennonite story since the sixteenth century is largely the history of a people on the fringe of various social and political systems. Initially driven by the denial of political citizenship and religious persecution, Mennonite theology soon also made participation in the larger social realities inimical to the path of religious virtue. The strong inclination to separate from worldly society and the ethical distinction between the church and the world created a bounded history marked by a high degree of cultural enclavement, political isolation and spatial segregation.

With the exception of the Dutch Mennonites, who early moved into the political, economic and artistic sectors of culture and fully participated in the "Golden Age" of Dutch national history, the subsequent Mennonite story took place in the mountains of Switzerland, the marshes of North Germany and Prussia, the hinterlands of the German Palatinate, the steppes of the Ukraine, the fringes of central European political society and the North American frontier. Mennonites became separated from the dominant surrounding cultures by language, distinctive cultural characteristics, ethnicity and religious commitments. In this relative isolation a church composed of those who met the exacting standards of religious experience and religious virtue, however defined, significantly shaped the contours of life. Largely unaffected by the secularizing trends of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many Mennonites remained a people living in medieval-like isolated villages.

5 The Anabaptist relationship to modernity has been the subject of an abundant historiography. The issue is part of the larger debate about the degree to which various sixteenth-century religious movements broke with the thought and structures of medieval faith and society. Among those seeing Anabaptism as a precursor of modernity are Roland Bainton, *Studies in the Reformation*, Collected Papers in Church History, II (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 199; Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relationship of Protestantism to the Modern World*, trans. W. Montgomery (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 48, 95-96, 104, 153, 174; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, vol. IV of *The Christian Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 305.

Thus, for centuries Anabaptism, while an ideological forerunner of modernity, was nourished by the social reality of an earlier time. Mennonites who continue even to this day to live in this lost isolation do so now only with an admirable and self-conscious determination.

If the story is a demonstration of the ability of the segregated church to maintain a distinctive identity over the course of time, it is also the story of the Mennonite family being separated by geographical isolation and differing histories, schisms over how much accommodation was possible, and division about differing strategies for survival. From the pluralist beginnings in the sixteenth century emerged three differing streams that contributed to the North American Mennonite world: a Swiss-South German Mennonite stream, which began permanent settlement in North America in 1683 at Germantown, Pennsylvania; a Dutch-northern European Mennonite stream that moved progressively east before migrations to North America began in the 1870s; and the Hutterite stream, which moved in the sixteenth century toward Eastern Europe before coming to North America in the late nineteenth century. The Amish emerged as a separate but interrelated part of the Swiss-South German stream in the late seventeenth century.

From the sixteenth into the nineteenth century, except for the Dutch Mennonites who remained in contact with varying parts of the diaspora that scattered both east (Poland and Russia) and west (America), there was little interaction between the streams that are now part of the American Mennonite mosaic. The nineteenth century was a period for rediscovering the shared ancestry and establishing new connections. The twentieth century has brought the previously disparate elements into many differing kinds of organizational and even institutional relationships.⁶

Although Mennonites were scattered and dispersed over different continents and host societies, there were similarities in their exile experiences. So long as Western history was itself largely fragmented, and so long as national economic, political and cultural integration did not pull smaller and diverse population segments into the larger national culture, then Mennonite geographical and cultural separateness maintained the protective barrier in which continuity with the past could be nourished. The intrusiveness of modernity, which during the nineteenth century pulled these marginal people into integrated and national societies, dramatically altered the shape of the Mennonite subculture in American and various European societies. The twentieth century posed new issues for Mennonites. They had learned to carve out an ethos on the margins of social systems where the patterns of social interaction with the dominant society could more easily be regulated. Now they

6 James C. Juhnke's *Becoming a Denomination: The Challenge of Organization and Identity for Mennonite Communities in America, 1890-1930* (forthcoming from Herald Press), while premised on the differing American Mennonite traditions rooted in these separate histories, also explores the initial twentieth-century ecumenical stirrings.

had to fashion a way of living after being pulled into the political, cultural, economic and ideational system of American society.

American Mennonites at mid-nineteenth century were still largely on the margins of American society. Rural isolation, village society and the cultural withdrawal following the Revolutionary War reinforced the prevailing ethic of separation.⁷ There were exceptions to be sure, yet for most Mennonites, like most Americans, small-village life was normative. Village society was like a loosely connected series of islands with exchange of news and goods but nevertheless retaining a sense of living independently. Intruding into this world came the late nineteenth-century industrial and urban revolutions, the new migrations and the building of a national culture.⁸

This new order brought these relatively isolated peoples into greater contact. The pressures for cultural assimilation and integration increased with the building of national economic and social networks. Provincial identities and loyalties were distorted by urban patterns of interaction and interdependence. The coming of modernity, whether by choice or intrusion, created a distended society at large and fractured the small Mennonite world. The fracturing that began already in 1812 accelerated throughout the nineteenth century, which saw successive, almost continuous schisms. American Mennonites and Amish entered the century as undifferentiated communions. They exited at the end of the century divided into numerous groups.

Mennonites entering the middle decades of the twentieth century were divided into seventeen identifiable subgroups. The 1936 government census recorded a total of 114,337 members for the seventeen separate groups. The largest, the Mennonite Church, numbered 46,301; the smallest, the Stauffer Mennonite Church, had 161 members. The General Conference Mennonites, the second largest, tallied 26,535. All of the other fifteen groups were under 10,000 communicants; nine were under 2000.⁹

Such fracturing as a response to the changed conditions of modernity is common among religious groups. Jacob Neusner argues convincingly that for Jews the impact of modernity was the death of Judaism and the birth of Judaisms. He identifies eight Judaisms that emerged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among the Dutch Calvinists four differing "men-

7 On the social and political withdrawal following the Revolutionary War, see Richard K. MacMaster, *Land, Piety, Peoplehood: The Establishment of Mennonite Communities in America, 1683-1790*, Mennonite Experience in America, I (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1985); Richard K. MacMaster with Samuel L. Horst and Robert F. Ulle, *Conscience in Crisis: Mennonites and Other Peace Churches in America, 1739-1789: Interpretation and Documents* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1979).

8 Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), chap. 1. This paragraph and the following are adaptations from Paul Toews, "Dissolving the Boundaries and Strengthening the Nuclei," *The Christian Leader*, XLV (July 27, 1982), 6.

9 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Religious Bodies, 1936: Mennonite Bodies; Statistics, Denominational History, Doctrines and Organization* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1940), 5.

talities" defined their tradition during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth. For both Jews and Dutch Calvinists the problem posed by modernity promoted differing axial principles and self-definitions.¹⁰

Among Mennonites the essential divisions were between "old" and "new" groups: Old Mennonites, New Mennonites, Old Order Mennonites, Old Order Amish and Progressive Amish. Both the new and the old Mennonites were responding to the encroachments of the larger society. They expressed two differing responses to the pressures for cultural conformity and homogenization. The new, or progressive, felt that elements of the new society, or the coming changes, could infuse the Mennonite imagination with greater vitality. The old, or conservative, protested that the infusion meant acculturation to profane ways. These differing responses shaped much of the subsequent story. The conservative Mennonites who resisted the coming of modernity remained on the margins of American society. They preserved forms of worship, patterns of church life, modes of dress, styles of authority and uses of technology that would insure their separateness from American society. While there were progressive schismatics to be sure, the tradition of withdrawal in American Mennonite history is more largely the story of conservative regimentation against the seductions of the world.

Before the modernizing impact of the national culture, Mennonites participated in what Clifford Geertz has called "primordial" unity, i.e., the corporate feeling of oneness that is present in stable and inherited relationships. The primordial ties are often unspoken, taken for granted. People are bound together by kinship, neighborliness, shared memories, symbols, customs and daily exchange. Mennonite (and Amish) primordial unity had been nurtured by the long period of European persecution. Differing immigrant generations during the 150 years following the first migration to America in 1683 remained within the same religious groupings. Primordial unity was common to many early American communities. It was the solidarity that emerges from people living in close proximity with shared daily experiences.¹¹ The Old Orders maintained the mechanisms to sustain this primordial unity. The mechanisms continued to bind them, protect coherence and harmony and insure continuity with the previous centuries.

The progressive receptivity to American ways assumed that Mennonite faith need not be encapsulated in particular cultural forms. Mennonite faith and peoplehood could exist not only on the margins of American society but also at its center. This progressive vision has clearly triumphed. The majority

10 On the Jewish response to modernity, see Jacob Neusner, *Death and Birth of Judaism: The Impact of Christianity, Secularism and the Holocaust on Jewish Faith* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). For the Dutch Reformed, see James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America: A History of a Conservative Subculture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1984).

11 See John Higham, "Hanging Together: Divergent Unities in American History," *Journal of American History*, LXI (1974), 7-9.

of Mennonites today live as participants in the dominant culture, although they do so at the expense of having diminished their primordial unity. New supplemental forms of unity became necessary. For the progressive Mennonites the forms that emerged were institutional, ideological and ecumenical. New patterns of institutional activity, new theological formulations and new inter-Mennonite alliances continue to nurture the form of community lost with the demise of village primordial unity.¹²

Two sets of events in 1927 signaled the differing futures of the "old" and "new" Mennonites seeking to preserve a sense of community into the middle and latter parts of the twentieth century. *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* began publication with the January 1927 issue. It quickly became the forum for the ideological reconstruction of the meaning of Anabaptist-Mennonite life. Also in 1927, in Pennsylvania, two schisms occurred among the groups seeking to regulate the impact of modernizing changes. The Wenger Mennonites emerged in Lancaster County, and the Beachy Amish emerged in Somerset County. Although the leaders and specific issues were different, both stories suggested the trajectory of continuing separation. Both were divisions that stemmed from the earlier fracturing of the Amish and Mennonite worlds in the nineteenth century.

The Amish in the early nineteenth century were scattered in small, somewhat isolated settlements. With the building of national exchange and informational networks, the variations in Amish culture became more obvious. In order to reconcile the differences, an annual General Ministers Conference began in 1862, aiming at consensual agreement that would maintain uniformity. The heightened pace of change, however, made that increasingly more difficult, and by 1878 the sessions closed with the recognition that consensual unanimity was past. The resulting divisions created three differing Amish communities. Those hoping to preserve the old traditions with only a minimum of change became known as the *Alt Amisch*, or Old Order Amish. They were increasingly characterized by the strong maintenance of tradition and by the shunning of those who failed to keep the strict convictions. A second group, largely of Alsatian origin, was more open to change. Most of them eventually joined the more progressive Mennonite family. A middling group favoring moderate changes organized into three regional associations or conferences.¹³

The 1927 schism of the Casselman congregation in Somerset County was between people in the Old Order Amish tradition. The question of finding an appropriate response to changes had created a division in this county already in 1895. Then the attendance of Amish young people at courses conducted by

12 In suggesting that institutional, ideological and ecumenical carriers of unity replaced the primordial, I am borrowing from Higham's notion that for American society ideological and technical forms came to replace the primordial.

13 John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society* (3rd ed.; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 273-74.

Daniel H. Bender, a popular Mennonite preacher, and the adoption of Sunday schools divided the congregation between the conservatives who worshiped in Pennsylvania and those more open to change who met across the state line in Maryland.¹⁴ The Pennsylvania group applied the ban to those accepting the innovations. In so doing, Bishop Moses D. Yoder stood in a long tradition of strictness upheld by the Somerset County Amish. But at least from 1912 on there were dissenting voices in the congregation against the ban of former members.¹⁵ The movement to reject the ban accelerated in 1927, following the death of Bishop Yoder, when full leadership of the congregation passed to Bishop Moses Beachy. By then it had also become linked to those advocating the adoption of Sunday schools and the use of electricity and automobiles. Those seeking change did so with the caution inherent among such conservatives. Rufus Beachy, writing to Bishop Moses Beachy, noted that "we are living in a progressive age, in which times and ways of doing things are changing most rapidly." Navigating through "rapidly changing times" required care.¹⁶

Pursuing change with care would become the hallmark of the Beachy Amish. In 1895 the Amish congregation of Casselman was singular. By 1930, after two divisions, its membership consisted of three separated Amish and Mennonite groups. Those following Moses Beachy might have considered joining the dissenters who had left in 1895. The Maryland congregation, although across the state line, was geographically proximate. Part of the reason for the 1927 split had been to restore the friendship with family and friends forbidden by the earlier schism. But for the 1927 seceders the Maryland congregation was too radical a departure. The young men of that congregation were clean-shaven and patronized barbers. Furthermore, though German was still used in their services, English was also creeping into their worship.

The Beachy Amish sought a middle way between accepting change and maintaining separation from the dominant culture. In 1927 the traditional Amish haircut and a full beard were expected. German was still the language of faith. Dress and language were to remain important carriers of the religious way of yieldedness to God. Technology could be accepted when appropriately

14 Alvin J. Beachy, "The Amish Settlement in Somerset County, Pennsylvania," *MQR*, XXVIII (1954), 279-83.

15 Alvin J. Beachy, "The Rise and Development of the Beachy Amish Mennonite Churches," *MQR*, XXIX (1955), 118-19.

16 Rufus Beachy to Moses Beachy, Dec. 11, 1926, Moses Beachy Collection, MSS 1-720, box 1, Archives of the Mennonite Church, Goshen, Ind.

altered to reflect the modesty of the Beachy Amish. Thus, automobiles would be painted black. Convenience need not undermine separation.¹⁷

The second fracture of 1927 happened among the Old Order Mennonites of Lancaster County. Old Order Mennonites, of various kinds, were Mennonites who during the nineteenth century segregated themselves from the larger Mennonite church over questions of change and modernization. The Stauffer segment withdrew already in 1845, while the larger Wisler schisms developed between 1872 and 1902 among Mennonite communities in Indiana, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ontario. While the two streams have much in common, they divide over the severity with which they practice the shunning of those who have left the respective group. A Wisler-affiliated split originally occurred in Lancaster County in 1893. Bishop Jonas H. Martin of the Weaverland District in the Lancaster Mennonite Conference led the movement in response to a series of innovations that seemed to threaten the inherited faith. Those changes included alterations in church architecture (primarily the installation of a Protestant-style pulpit in one congregation); the increasing use of English instead of German in religious services; the introduction of Sunday school curricula that rewarded students for winning Bible memory contests (which introduced new forms of competition); the purchase of insurance (which lessened dependence on the church community in times of financial stress); and a host of other changes associated with the coming of the technological order.¹⁸

In 1927 the further division occurred over the use of the automobile. So long as Bishop Jonas Martin, the founder of the Old Orders in Lancaster County, remained alive, he could enforce the ban on the purchase of automobiles. His death in 1925 cast the movement into tension between two successors: Bishops Dan Wenger and Moses Horning. Wenger feared both the new mobility that the car introduced as well as its identification primarily with the "proud" and "fashionable" people. It countered the central Old Order commitments to plainness, humility and yieldedness. Moses Horning, from the first appearance of cars among the Old Orders in the early 1920s, found them practical and utilitarian rather than ethically threatening. A fellow minister, John Kurtz, was a more vocal defender of motorized transportation as an acceptable form of technological advance. His defense is typical of that used to justify other technical advances of the past century. Kurtz granted that innovations were frequently first accepted by the worldly people—"puffed up" and with "high heads." But with time their symbolic meaning became

17 Beachy, "The Rise and Development," 133. See also Elmer S. Yoder, *The Beachy Amish Mennonite Fellowship Churches* (Hartville, Ohio: Diakonia Ministries, 1987). In surveying the entire story of the Beachy Amish, Yoder concurs that the Somerset developments ought to be thought of as the beginnings of the Beachy fellowship, but notes that others point to 1927 Lancaster County movements as the originating place.

18 See Amos Hoover, *The Jonas Martin Era* (Denver, Pa.: By the author, 1982); Amos Hoover, "The Old Order Mennonites," in *Mennonite World Handbook*, ed. Paul N. Kraybill (Lombard, Ill.: Mennonite World Conference, 1978), 374-81; Juhnke, chap. 2.

diffused. Once that diffusion had occurred, they were acceptable so long as they were not the most fashionable variety.¹⁹

The tension could not be harmonized. With the death of Bishop Martin, Bishop Horning stopped excommunicating members who purchased cars. This relaxation of the communal discipline resulted in the withdrawal of a splinter group under the leadership of Bishop Wenger. The division between the "team" (horses) and "car" Old Order Mennonites of Lancaster County persists to this day.

Both the Somerset and Lancaster County groups that in 1927 again articulated boundaries of segregation from the larger society did so to preserve the inherited faith of the fathers. Both groups considered themselves faithful to the "old" tradition. Both exemplify the strategy of boundary maintenance to insure the survival of a religious community against threatening changes.

The 1927 progressive Mennonite response to modernity, like the schisms, was part of a process that began in the late nineteenth century. The earliest progressive development was a receptivity to the institutional forms common to much of American Protestantism. The three largest progressive groups, the Mennonite Church, the General Conference Mennonites and the Mennonite Brethren, all participated in an institutional renaissance, commonly referred to as denominationalizing. It brought Sunday schools, church periodicals, mission societies and boards, revival meetings and other special services, church colleges, publishing houses and other new practices. The rapid growth of higher educational institutions is illustrative: Bethel College (North Newton, Kansas), 1893; Elkhart Institute, which became Goshen College (Goshen, Indiana), 1894; Bluffton College (Bluffton, Ohio), 1900; Freeman College (Freeman, South Dakota), 1903; Tabor College (Hillsboro, Kansas), 1908; Hesston College (Hesston, Kansas), 1909; and Eastern Mennonite College (Harrisonburg, Virginia), 1917.

The organization of conference structures and bureaucracies was part of this institutional revival. Individual congregations increasingly linked up through regional, district and, finally, national conferences. What the General Conference Mennonites began in 1860, with the formation of a national conference, was soon followed by others. The formation of the Mennonite General Conference in 1898, the 1878 initiation of the Mennonite Brethren conference and their 1909-1913 creation of the various district conferences, the creation of the Amish Mennonite conferences and their merger with Mennonite General Conference between 1916 and 1927—all illustrate the need for linkages at multiple levels.

19 See Emma Hurst, "Moses G. Horning and the Old Order Divisions in Pennsylvania," *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*, XXI (Apr. 1960), 1-2, 4; Robert Bates Graber, "The Sociocultural Differentiation of a Religious Sect: Schisms Among the Pennsylvania German Mennonites" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 1979). The quotations are from "The Automobile Issue Among the Old Order Mennonites: 1920," a printing of the Kurtz letter in the *Mennonite Historical Bulletin*, XXVII (Oct. 1976), 5-6.

The denomination is the unique form of church organization that is neither linked to the civil powers, like the state church, nor defined by its opposition to the established church, like the sect. Rather, it is purposive, being organized to achieve definable objectives. Common faith and common life is presumed, but common work is also expected. The "mission" and the activity of the group take on heightened importance.²⁰

The institutional renaissance clearly succeeded in bringing new vitality and work into the various Mennonite denominations. It also served to demarcate more clearly the various Mennonite denominations. Each developed an impressive array of particular institutional structures. Denominational institutions and activities can be articulators of denominational identity and carriers of new forms of distinctiveness and loyalty.²¹

When Harold Bender and a group of younger intellectuals at Goshen College began publication of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, they were pursuing a different strategy for the preservation of Mennonite life and faith that emerged from the fraternity of Mennonite-related historians. C. Henry Smith, John Horsch, Ernst Correll, Robert Friedmann, Cornelius Krahn, Guy Hershberger, Edmund G. Kaufman and Harold S. Bender, all working in various institutional contexts (primarily the Mennonite colleges), cumulatively reconceptualized the Mennonite past and, in the process, articulated an ideological vision capable of simultaneously protecting the distinctiveness of the past while encouraging greater social engagement with the larger society.

Harold Bender was both colleague and leader in this redefining of a usable past. Like his conservative cousins in Pennsylvania, he was impressed with the necessity of maintaining historical Mennonitism. He was interested in the process of modernization and concerned about its impact on Mennonite peoplehood. He realized the need for solidarity amidst the fracturing impulses of technological and cultural change. He became one of the foremost leaders of the progressive Mennonites. He stood in the tradition of the progressives who saw the creation of an institutional network as a means of binding people together and creating new forms of loyalty and interaction. He spent much of his life in these institutional networks. In fact, he could be described as one of the premier institutional creators and maintainers of his

20 On the nature of American denominationalism, see Russell E. Richey, ed. *Denominationalism* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1977). For a discussion of denominations as "purposive," see Sydney Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

21 The literature that reflects on Mennonite denominationalizing is considerable: Juhnke; Rodney J. Sawatsky, "History and Ideology: American Mennonite Identity Definition through History" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1977); Beulah Hostetler, "Franconia Mennonite Conference and American Protestant Movements, 1840-1940" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1977); Theron F. Schlabach, "Reveille for *die Stillen im Lande*: A Stir among Mennonites in the Late Nineteenth Century," *MQR*, LI (1977), 213-26.

generation.²² Yet his more significant strategy for confronting the acids of modernity was the articulation of a clearer belief system. It was an ideological strategy rooted in an understanding of the degree to which ideas could provide for a corporate sense of belonging. Ideas or generalized belief systems typically are central to religious communities. Mennonites have historically defined and separated themselves from other religious movements by an appeal to a different belief system.

The ideological system of the 1920s was, however, conflictual rather than unitive. Mennonites, like other denominations, were caught in the wider struggle between fundamentalism and liberalism as opposing intellectual and cultural responses to modernity. Beginning in 1898 with Daniel Kauffman's *Manual of Bible Doctrine*, the pace of Mennonite theologizing quickened. The problem was that the ideological systems used in the modernizing process were mixtures of inherited and newly borrowed elements. Mennonite schoolmen and publishers sought to identify the central affirmations of Mennonite faith. What frequently emerged were the refurbishing of old theologies in new dress and also the appearance of new orthodoxies. The early promise of Mennonite theologizing seemed not to be unity but the fragmentation of both the larger Mennonite world and many of its constituent parts. Both fundamentalism and modernism as foreign ideologies were unsuitable carriers of Mennonite identity.²³

The larger and progressive Mennonite denominations all experienced tensions during the 1920s and in the subsequent decades over real and imagined issues of this fundamentalist/modernist American conflict. As in other denominations, the institutions of higher learning became the battleground for the opposing factions. Insofar as Mennonites instinctively leaned into the conservative side of the debate and the "fundamentalists" controlled the denominational machinery, a factitious conformity was achieved. But it was done at the cost of losing a considerable number of capable intellectual leaders. Ideological unity could replace the eroding primordial unity, but only if it was congruent with the past as well as future needs.

The first, January 1927 issue of *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* made clear its intent to fashion an ideology that connected past and present. Bender's editorial noted that the *Review's* "sole" aim was to serve "the historic ideals and faith of the Mennonite Church." He was confident that a fresh articulation of those ideals would lead the church into "the Golden Age" that was "just ahead."²⁴ But it was to be a future radically different from the past.

22 On Bender's career, see John C. Wenger et al., *Harold S. Bender: Educator, Historian, Churchman* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1964).

23 This paragraph is adapted from Toews, "Dissolving the Boundaries," 8.

24 Harold S. Bender, Editorial and "To the Youth of the Mennonite Church"—a promotional page for the new journal—*MQR*, I (1927), 1, iv.

Bender's initial and specific objective was to steer a course away from the seductions of both fundamentalism and liberalism. By choosing history to define the new ideology, he made possible a more fundamental shift in Mennonite thought and social reality. Bender, and other Mennonite historians as well, instinctively knew that articulating a usable past was a means of defining the present and shaping the future. Mennonite self-identity had been substantially shaped by its historical imagination. Although they had frequently been denied land, political and cultural continuity, and freedom of religious practice, they could not be denied the past. It became a source of inspiration and self-definition.²⁵ What was now required was a redefining of the past that would permit the increasing social engagement with the larger society while simultaneously preserving the distinctiveness of the past.

Mennonites had long suffered from a bad press. From the first interpreters of the Reformation in the sixteenth century through the established scholarship of the mid-nineteenth century, the collective portrait of the Anabaptists was given to identifying them as negators, extremists and social agitators. Bender was not the first to challenge this interpretation, but his work was central to the twentieth century's refashioning of Anabaptist-Mennonite historiography. Furthermore, he provided the charismatic moment for a shift in Mennonite self-understanding. He delivered the presidential address, "The Anabaptist Vision," to the American Society of Church History at its annual meeting in December 1943. This address was to shape indelibly the Mennonite historical consciousness. No other single event or piece of scholarship has filtered into Mennonite imaginations like this one. The expression "Anabaptist Vision" became the identifying incantation for North American Mennonites.

When Bender at the outset of his address claimed for his intellectual ancestors " 'a programme for a new type of Christian society which the modern world, especially in America and England, has been slowly realizing,' " his distinguished colleagues in the American Society of Church History would not demur.²⁶ The program that Bender attributed to the Anabaptists was threefold: a conception of Christianity in which discipleship was the essence; a conception of the church as a brotherhood; and a commitment to an ethic of love and nonresistance. By defining the ethical impulses implicit in discipleship as central, Bender made it easier to sidestep the doctrinal centeredness of fundamentalism. Defining the church as a new and alternative community bound together by voluntary and mutual sharing and equality offered solidarity amidst increasing social and geographical mobility.

25 See Sawatsky.

26 Harold S. Bender, "Anabaptist Vision," *Church History*, XIII (1944), 3-4.

Making peace and nonresistance the central elements of Mennonite social ethics promised a prophetic witness to a culture increasingly prone to the use of violence.

The Anabaptist Vision was not new. It did not represent a departure from historical Mennonite practice. The discipleship concept embedded in the German phrase *Nachfolge Christi*, the church or *Gemeinde* as a people bound together in ways that differentiated them from the surrounding culture, and the practice of nonresistance were common to the history of all Mennonite peoples. What was new was the scholarly articulation of the "vision" and its acceptability both to Mennonite people and to the academic and religious high culture of American society. The address permitted Mennonites to refashion their place in history and thus in the mosaic of American religious pluralism. That the refashioning was done with the approval of the academic culture only heightened the developing sense of legitimacy.

The Anabaptist Vision as an ideological construct came to provide ideological justification and reinforcement for the continuation of the Mennonite tradition precisely when the social environment most threatened its survival as a spatial entity. In 1943 Bender's own social ideal lay in the withdrawn community. His address concluded with a call for withdrawal: "The Christian may in no circumstance participate in any conduct in the existing social order which is contrary to the spirit and teaching of Christ and the apostolic practice. He must consequently withdraw from the worldly system and create a social order within the fellowship of the church brotherhood."²⁷

But like many ideas, this one had a bipolar quality. It moved Mennonites inward toward the creation of a "Christian social order" and simultaneously outward in missionary activism. The decades that followed this ideological reorientation brought a witness and service activism that vastly enlarged the scope of Mennonite benevolence. Ideologies are not only belief systems, but they also, as John Higham notes, "give large bodies of people a common program of action and a standard for self-criticism."²⁸ The fixing of a historical particularity empowered Mennonites to move into forms of activity previously threatening to a more precarious self-identity. The changes legitimated by an appeal to historical fact and the linking of the changes to the linear development of the past now made change appear as continuity. History having been made the court of appeal, new programs and new directions were now natural increments in the history of Anabaptist-Mennonite peoples. The past ironically eased much of the fear of cultural change and adjustment that characterized Mennonite people in the first third of the century. History paradoxically became the handmaiden of the modernizers.

If the first impact of modernity was to fracture Mennonitism into Mennonitisms, the second impact was to bring Mennonites back together. A Menno-

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁸ Higham, 10.

nite ecumenical renaissance has been the third means by which the progressive Mennonites revitalized their sense of particularity. Mennonite ecumenicity is a hedge against the subtle pressures for conformity that smaller distinctive denominations feel in American society. The forms of the ecumenical renaissance have been both denominational mergers and an associational movement.

Beginning with the formation of Mennonite Central Committee in 1920 and particularly during and subsequent to World War II, Mennonites previously segregated have again found each other in over 110 inter-Mennonite associations. These associations are voluntary gatherings of people for many different reasons. They span the schisms of the past and render the denominational differences nearly inconsequential. They exist at least in part because they are ways to express or explore more fully one aspect of the larger Mennonite tradition. They are designed to provide social or ideological activities and to focus Mennonite work in the larger world. They are the new form of gathering for work, play, worship and conversation. Most are associations of conviction and service.²⁹

The largest of these voluntary associations—Mennonite Central Committee, Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS) and relief sale committees—become subcommunities of work and engagement over extended periods of time. For many people these units take on much of the quality of primary communities. MDS volunteers work together for weeks and even months at the reconstruction of homes and businesses after natural disasters. Relief sale quilters shape their weekly schedule around the common quilting times. Today there are conferences and networks for Mennonite retirees, young adults, farmers, social workers, historians, nurses, editors, peacemakers and ever so many social groups. These associations involve less time, but that does not diminish the way in which they furnish concrete identity symbols. For example, some Mennonite businesspeople feel that the shape of their work and the texture of their lives have been significantly affected by the Mennonite Economic Development Associates. The Mennonite Medical Association also provides a network of professional colleagues, friendship and ethical discernment.

In these inter-Mennonite networks, which increasingly pull more people into their orbit, many gain a sense of the richness and multicolored tapestry of the Mennonite world. It permits the smaller constituent groups to feel part of something that transcends the limitations of their individual and recent histories. The inter-Mennonite community provides a second level of belonging and meaning that can be more spacious, imaginative and enduring.³⁰

29 See Paul N. Kraybill, "North American Inter-Mennonite Relationships" (unpublished paper, 1974); Ken Neufeld, "Factors Associated with the Growth in Number of Inter-Mennonite Organizations" (graduate student paper, University of Southern California, 1981).

30 The previous two paragraphs are adapted from Paul Toews, "Mennonite Myths and Realities," *Christian Living*, XXXIII (Oct. 1986), 21-26.

Denominations make a unique contribution to the religious tapestry of North American society. They add color, depth and meaning to the tradition of American religious pluralism. But smaller denominations across the spectrum find that they are strengthened by linkages to other bodies of similar conviction. Some of the smaller Mennonite groups that have been unwilling or unable to enter fully into the Mennonite ecumenical renaissance have witnessed a substantial erosion and even transformation of their historical identities.³¹ Mennonite ecumenicity has functioned analogous to Will Herberg's triple melting pot for Protestants, Catholics and Jews.³² Some Mennonites, rather than being assimilated into American society, are assimilated into differing segments of Mennonitism. Mennonite sociologists have for some time noted the existence of a Mennonite acculturation ladder that permits internal movement within the boundaries of the larger family.³³

The 1936 Census Bureau compilers were certain that the future would witness the greater cultural and theological assimilation of Mennonites. Their introduction included observations probably common to many external observers of the small Mennonite world. They attributed the conviction that the requirements of civil law and the teachings of Christian faith might be antithetical to the past persecution and present "clannish qualities."³⁴ The logical conclusion, though not explicitly stated, was that as Mennonites experienced the freedom of this pluralistic society and assimilated out of their clannish communities these distinctive beliefs would dissipate. The perspective was both a good and a poor forecast of the coming decades. Mennonite distinctives paradoxically would become both stronger and more tenuous. The clannish would be taxed by the cultural and economic integration of a national society, but democratic pluralism and a revitalized ideological self-consciousness would also permit the flourishing of a distinct Mennonite identity.

The government compilers were more accurate with their second prediction—that the schismatic and divisive history that produced these innumerable smaller denominations would give way "to closer union and cooperation along certain common lines of gospel work. . . ."³⁵ They were surely prophetic. The coming decades witnessed a Mennonite ecumenical renaissance that, although not dissolving many denominational groups, did bridge both the theological and the cultural differences.

31 The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren are an example. See Cal Redekop, "The Embarrassment of a Religious Tradition," *Mennonite Life*, XXXVI (Sept. 1981), 17-21; Kevin Enns-Rempel, "The Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches and the Quest for Religious Identity," *MQR*, LXIII (1989), 247-264.

32 See Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955).

33 See Leo Driedger, "The Anabaptist Identification Ladder: Plain-Urbane Continuity in Diversity," *MQR*, LI (1977), 278-91.

34 *Census of Religious Bodies, 1936*, 3.

35 *Ibid.*

The Mennonite story exemplifies the enduring character of cultural and convictional communities in the face of modern pressures for conformity. Social science theory since the mid-nineteenth century assumed that religious communities, among other traditional forms of particularity, would give way to the integrative pressures of modernization, urbanization and global economic systems. Community was thought to be on the "decline," facing "erosion or eclipse" and "breaking-up."³⁶ The transition defined by sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies from "Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft" was considered to be determinative of all social realities. It was the transition from community to society, or from what Emile Durkheim called "mechanical solidarity," which presumed a psychological consensus, to "organic solidarity," based on functional interdependence and vocational segmentation.

This grand paradigm for understanding Western history is increasingly under assault. The straight-line logic of modernization theory failed to take into account the persistence and social inventiveness of communities with their own sense of particularity and their ability to preserve and even extend themselves. Mennonite theology and culture have resisted this process of self-differentiation and the emergence of the autonomous self. To the degree that it has been successful, it stands as a counter trend to American modernizing culture.³⁷

Mennonite spatial community has given way and will continue to do so. The Mennonite village with its face-to-face intimacy and warmth will hold fewer and fewer of its sons and daughters. But community, as Thomas Bender suggests, "can be defined better as an experience than as a place." The experience is a "network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds."³⁸ This network, defined by Kai T. Erikson as the "human surround," need not be limited to contiguous territory. Community is

36 Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 4.

37 Mennonites have not always been sure that the pressures of modernity could be resisted. Social science theory initially informed Mennonite reflection about modernity around 1940. The first embrace created an unease about the future. Examples of this early social science disquietude are numerous. See Karl Baehr, "Secularization among the Mennonites of Elkhart County, Indiana," *MQR*, XVI (1942), 131-60; Melvin Gingerich, "Rural Life Problems and the Mennonites," *MQR*, XVI (1942), 167-73; Guy Hershberger, "Maintaining the Mennonite Rural Community," *MQR*, XIV (1940), 214-23. It was easy to assume that modernization, the demise of community, and secularization were all interlinked. Gingerich, 169, noted that "our former rural security is disappearing, we are becoming secularized, our community life is breaking down and our culture is losing its distinctive qualities." Hershberger, 220, evidenced much the same concern: "The rural environment, it seems, is much better fitted for the preservation of the Mennnite way of life than is the city environment." The role of this social science in influencing Mennonite responses to modernity invites further research.

38 T. Bender, 6-7.

something that happens. It can happen in local communities. But as modern social systems make territorial communities less normative, differing structural forms become the new carriers.³⁹

While the dominant story of twentieth-century American Mennonites is clearly the movement from the margins of American society toward greater participation in its culture, institutions and values, it is also the story of maintaining a discernible community. The Old Orders have worked harder at preserving the territorial communities that historically characterized most Mennonites. The progressive Mennonites have worked harder to preserve their sense of community by appropriating new denominational structures, new ideological formulations and new ecumenical alliances. Yet all have found the mixture a way to live with a continuing sense of Mennonite identity amidst a national and pluralistic society.

³⁹ *Ibid.* Leo Driedger—in “Mennonite Community Change: From Ethnic Enclaves to Social Networks,” *MQR*, LX (1986), 374-86, and in “*MQR* 60: Weaving Scholarly Mennonite Networks,” *MQR*, LXI (1987), 395-412—has effectively utilized network theory to describe some of those new structural forms.